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ABSTRACT

Many theories have been developed to try to explain humor, among them, the social theory; psychoanalytic theories based on Freud; cognitive theories which identify stages corresponding to those of Piaget; and eclectic theories which combine elements of all the theories. The developmental stages of humor parallel the intellectual and emotional development of the individual. Primary children enjoy slapstick and comic mishap. By the time children has reached the intermediate grades, they have developed quite a sense of the logical principles of humor. Humor for the intermediate child becomes a vehicle for social interaction. As children reach secondary school, their sense of humor is still developing but they can relate to all types of humor, including much that is targeted toward adults. Children's preferences in literature naturally follow the developmental stages mentioned. When selecting humorous books for children, their preferences and interests at the various levels of development must be taken into consideration. Aside from being a powerful motivational factor for children since it appeals to them and promotes their willingness to read and write, humorous literature can provide other educational functions in the classroom. Listening and speaking skills are strengthened when students can relate a funny story of their personal experience--writing it down and illustrating it turns it into a valuable literary experience. Because young children are learning phonology, syntax, and the semantics of language, humorous rhymes, repetition, chants, and nonsense stories are a great source for instruction. (NKA)

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Humorous Literature: A Doorway to Literacy

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To define and thus operationalize the construct of "humor" seems somehow to diminish the lighthearted enjoyment that is derived from this phenomenon. To appreciate a joke or humorous situation involves a cognitive, creative, problem solving process. It is a very complex form of intellectual play. Response to humor is strongest when there is some cognitive challenge to the funny element (O'Bryan-Garland and Worley, 1986). Incongruity is a necessary but not singularly sufficient condition for humor. The level of funniness is thought to increase as divergence between two mental representations increases. The art of invoking laughter emerges when skill in achieving meaning through discordant elements occurs. Incongruity--any unexpected, illogical, exaggerated or out of context set of circumstances--is funny (Hebert, 1991). Humor is an intregal part of all of us. It is an individualized imprint upon our personalities. A person's ability to respond to humor is an indicator of healthy mental and emotional development. A good sense of humor has been called the mark of a creative thinker (Smith, 1988). Laughter can be an exercise in feeling and caring (O'Bryan-Garland and Worley, 1986). It can also be used to humiliate and abuse but this side of humor will not be examined herein. Sometimes humor can be manipulated to serve our needs. It can be a mechanism employed to conjure up courage in an uncomfortable situation. It can relieve tension both individually and collectively and it is a defense against life's "vexations and woes"

(Shaughnessy and Stanley, 1991 and Hinson, 1970). Sociologists have long since recognized the value of humor as a tool for social influence. Group moral, cohesiveness and conflict management can at times be addressed through the use of humor. Thus, human beings need to laugh and have been doing so from the beginning of time. The disparaging side of life would be far too depressing without an escape to that place that we call Humor. Humor in print is as old as print itself. Hence, humorous literature is a part of our literary experience. Considering that there are many who only read the funnies, humorous literature may be the only print that some individuals read.

There have been many theories developed in order to try to explain humor. The Social theory of humor states that humor is a vehicle for establishing more satisfying group interactions. Social theorists also say that humor is culture specific and does much to foster the transmission of cultural mores. The psychoanalytic theories are based upon the works of Freud and explain humor as a socially acceptable expression of forbidden impulses . Cognitive theories which identify stages corresponding to those of Piaget stages include several affective components. One or more of these components are the elements of humor according to cognitive theorists. The components are as follows:

- Incongruity--prior experiences leading to unexpected or new cognitive structuring; illogical, disjointed, ambiguous, inappropriate; some expectation is violated

- Superiority--roots in Greek philosophers, triumph of one individual or group over another
- Disparagement--humor disguised as aggression, related to superiority, used at the expense of others
- Relief--explains affective function, release of energy anger or frustration, tension relief, coping mechanism

There are also eclectic theories which combine the elements of the psychoanalytical, social and cognitive theories (Jalongo, 1985).

Across all of these theories are a number of variables which effect responses to humor. The degree of detachment is an important aspect. A topic cannot be one which is sensitive or serious to the individual. If a person identifies too strongly with the object of humor, the desired effect will not take place. In fact, instead of making the person laugh, he may very well be moved to tears or anger. Timing can also be crucial in a humorous event. There must be a period of anticipation followed by a sudden solution. The level of one's cognitive development certainly effects response to humor (Hinson, 1970). The social context within which the humorous element is introduced is also important. People will laugh more readily when they are with others as a part of an audience than if they are alone (Jalongo, 1985).

The developmental stages of humor parallel the intellectual and emotional development of the individual. For infants and toddlers, humor is synonymous with actions performed either on them or by them. The children are in a presocial and symbiotic

period. They enjoy action rather than language. Children at this stage delight in funny faces, noises and gestures done either by them or by those around them. This stage roughly corresponds to Piaget's stage of sensorimotor intelligence (Smith, 1988). This is followed by the preschool stage which is characterized by impulsiveness, enjoyment of body parts and body noises! Here, the child begins to understand the humor in incongruous events--occurrences that are different from their expectations. Carrying forward from the preschool stage and into the primary stage, children begin to understand such things as reversal of roles and functions and also the reversal of size or dimensions (Jalongo, 1985). They enjoy ludicrous visual conditions and more advanced perceived discrepancies (Smith, 1988). Primary children enjoy slapstick and comic mishap (Jalongo, 1985). By the time the child has reached the intermediate grades, he has developed quite a sense of the logical principles of humor. His cognitive abilities enable him to plan and set up practical jokes because he is capable of forethought and delayed gratification. This age child also enjoys humor that tends to be either corny, degrading or smutty. Humor for the intermediate child becomes a vehicle for social interaction. As a child reaches secondary school, his or her sense of humor is still developing but he or she can relate to all types of humor, including much that is targeted toward adults.

Children's preferences in humorous literature naturally follow the developmental stages mentioned above. The table below gives a

quick view of children's literature preferences at intervals throughout childhood.

AGE	TYPE OF HUMOROUS LITERATURE
Infant/Toddler	Sensory Stimulation, Direct Physical Participation (Participation Books)
Early Childhood/Preschool	Clowning, Slapstick, Nonsense Expressions and Chants
Early Childhood/Primary Grades	Add to above: Insults, Practical Jokes and Hostile Humor
Middle Childhood	Add to above: Riddles, Word Play, Conventional Jokes, Other language based humor

(Jalongo, 1985, p.112)

Older children prefer poems and satire that are reality based. There appears to be no difference in preferences of the type of literature between genders, only the subject matter (Hinson, 1970).

In selecting humorous books for children, their preferences and interests at the various levels of development must be taken into consideration. A child's perception of humor can be very different from that of an adult. Funny children's books are seldom viewed as such by adults (Jalongo, 1985). Oftentimes, the child's preferences have been studied but not their interests. A literature preference is what a person reads when offered a choice among types of literature.

A literature interest is shown when the individual has the desire to read and does read the literature of his own choosing without the benefit of being given limited choices. Both preferences and interests must be kept in mind when choosing or making literature available for children. When books fail to amuse children, this indicates that there has been a poor match between the child's cognitive development and the reading material.

Aside from being a very powerful motivational factor for children in that it appeals to them and promotes their willingness to read and write (O'Bryan-Garland and Worley, 1986), humorous literature can provide many other educational functions in the classroom. Humor bridges right and left brain activity. It can turn a "Ha Ha" to an "Aha!" Humorous literature produces heightened awareness and allows the mind to associate more freely, openly and clearly. Humor helps children develop better complex reasoning skills (Smith, 1998). It helps develop higher order thinking skills and channels people's minds into investigative, seeking, grasping thinking processes. "In some respects, the greatest intellectual fluency in conversation, reading, and writing occurs during playful, joking, and humorous interactions." (Goelman, 1984, p. 46). In humorous situations, words are manipulated and messaged to give multiple, rich and often complicated meanings. Listening and speaking skills are strengthened when students can relate a funny story of their own experience. The related experience becomes a valuable literary experience when it is further enhanced by writing it down and illustrating it. Humor has the ability to rattle

perceptions and help children look at situations in a new and different light. In one study, when students were asked to use humor in answering test questions, it was seen that the creativity which emerged resulted in improved test scores. Indeed, humor may legitimize non-conventional, divergent thinking (Hebert, 1991).

Because young children are learning phonology, syntax and the semantics of language, humorous rhymes, repetition, chants and nonsense stories are a great source for instruction (Jalongo, 1985). Students with minimal reading and writing skills can enjoy humorous literature through the use of cartoons, comics and joke books. Joke books are usually well illustrated. They are small, inexpensive, enjoyable and a must in any print rich environment. Students can be encouraged to write down their favorite jokes to share with classmates. Students can write and illustrate comic strips, inventing their own characters. Again, these activities reinforce and foster listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (Shaughnessy and Stanley, 1991). Humorous poetry is always a delightful experience for children of all ages (Halsted, 1988). Other genre of humorous literature is written and read at all levels throughout the world. Because of its highly motivational nature, its fostering of higher level cognitive skills and its nurturing of divergent and creative thinking, humorous literature should be an intregal part of any language arts program.

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